

CONFERENCE REPORT

A Good Local School for Every Child: will the Education Bill deliver?

**Institute of Education,
University of London, 25 March 2006**

FIRST PLENARY SESSION

Chris Waterman, Children's Services Editor of *Education Journal*, welcomed everybody to the Conference and apologised for the absence of Helena Kennedy as chairperson.

Professor Stephen Ball, in welcoming everyone to the Conference on behalf of London University's Institute of Education, commented on the huge diversity of the participants. He emphasised that the White Paper and the Education and Inspections Bill were just part of New Labour's transformation of the public sector. It was all part of a new concept of the role of the State in the provision of public services. All this was also part of Tony Blair's concept of a 'meritocratic society' and of a particular concept of the nature of human 'abilities'. One of the most chilling passages in the White Paper talks in terms of all children as being either 'gifted and talented', 'struggling' or 'just average' (p. 20).

Professor Ball was followed by **Steve Sinnott**, General Secretary of the National Union of Teachers (NUT), who welcomed participants on behalf of the NUT. He argued that 'a good local school for every child' encapsulated the essential principle of comprehensive education. He specified four priorities:

- The promotion of social inclusion in all its aspects
- The ending of selection
- The principle of local accountability, and
- The abolition of the role of private sponsors.

He emphasised that there would be a vast improvement if schools *cooperated* a little more and *competed* a little less.

In closing, Steve Sinnott paid tribute, in particular, to the work of Melissa Benn and Fiona Millar, for their work on promoting comprehensive education. He thanked Sheila Dainton for the way in which she had overseen the organisation of the conference

Professor Ron Glatter talked about all the gross misrepresentation surrounding the Bill. There was very little research evidence that supported the contentions of the White Paper and of the Bill. Indeed, all the evidence showed that excellence and high standards were associated with the principles underlying comprehensive education. There was too little coherence in the system and no evidence that improvement and progress were associated with the idea of giving individual schools *more* autonomy. It was astonishing that the Prime Minister should compare the introduction of Trust schools with the selling off of council houses, one of Margaret Thatcher's favourite initiatives.

Dr Bethan Marshall of King's College, London argued that if academic selection was a bad idea, the essential solution must be comprehensive education. What the White Paper and the Bill offered was the solution of the marketplace, with its notions of success and failure. Parental choice was a myth: in London, two-thirds of parents who indicated a choice of schools *failed* to get their first choice. Children were being turned into 'products' and the essential feature was the role of examination results.

Hamish McCallum was appearing as a student at Redruth School in Cornwall and as a representative of ESSA (the English Secondary Students' Association). He argued that all school students should be given the right to develop and prosper. He was concerned about the proposals in the Bill about *school behaviour*. The essential principle underlying school behaviour should be *mutual* respect between teachers and pupils. He was also concerned about the comments on the need to abolish 'junk food'. What was missing in the Bill was the role of school students in the formulation of policy.

Trisha Jaffe, headteacher of Kidbrooke School in Greenwich, said that it was really sad and tragic that it was *necessary* to hold today's Conference. She said that she was proud to be working at Kidbrooke School in Greenwich, the first purpose-built comprehensive school, opened in 1954. She thought that the Bill was invidious and would have a more *malign* influence on the education system than even the legislation of the Thatcher years. She was particularly concerned about the nature of 'trust schools', though not specifically referred to as such in the Bill. She argued that, had it not been for Britain's comprehensive schools, Tony Blair could not hit the target of 50 per cent of young people going on to some form of higher education. There was no clear idea in the Bill of what actually constituted a 'good school'. Everything seemed to depend on the percentage of sixteen-year olds gaining at least five A*-C passes at GCSE.

Mike Davies, principal of Bishops Park College in Clacton, Essex, began contrasting contrary sets of government policies and initiatives and suggested that far from a government proclaiming itself as 'best when it is bold', it in fact lacked leadership and coherent direction. In particular it found difficulty in endorsing the key principles of every child having 'equal value', social justice

and recognising and celebrating a wider range of talents – the essential ideas of the comprehensive school. Mike highlighted a recent survey comparing attitudes of primary and secondary pupils. Asked if they were learning at school, enjoyed it and found it interesting the survey showed dramatic differences between primary and secondary pupils. The percentages of primary pupils responding positively were 65 per cent and above; for secondary the percentages were 18 per cent and below. He said we must listen more to the student's voice and that in addressing the issue of 'school' being seen by many as irrelevant, the Bill was far too timid, failing to tackle core issues of curriculum reform, pedagogic renewal and assessment for all. Even this timidity, however, was pale compared to the lack of trust that many had in relation to the political will to pursue natural justice and give every child a really good school through robust measures that would make for balanced intakes – the real key to raising standards rather than reinforcing selection and stratification. **Melissa Benn** said that she thought of herself as an angry parent who wanted a better education system. She was interested in the language of the current debate noticing an essential *blandness* in modern political language. Everyone mouthed the same, often meaningless, slogans: the need to end selection; every child matters, etc. The essential divide was between those who wanted to separate, select and divide and those who wanted all children to be educated together. There was also a conflict between the idea of public provision and the involvement of private enterprise in State education. There was enormous confusion about what constituted a 'good' and 'happy' school. There have been changes between the publication of the White Paper and that of the Bill, and the Bill is not quite what Tony Blair originally intended. We need to think about three principles:

- educating our children together
- endorsing the neighbourhood principle
- promoting a comprehensive curriculum.

Fiona Millar pointed out that there had always been *diversity* in the education system. In some respects there was now *less* choice, since most secondary schools had to observe the provisions of the National Curriculum. Choice of schools was an illusion. A recent *Which?* Survey showed that 95 per cent of parents simply wanted a good local community school for their children. Yet many parents could not get their children into the local school and many schools were using all forms of covert selection. The crucial debate now centred on *admissions*. We need to know what the Admissions Code will look like. We need to talk far more about the role of parents and the role of the community. It was crucial to keep up the pressure on the Government. There were enormous challenges ahead.

SECOND PLENARY SESSION

Margaret Tulloch, Secretary of Comprehensive Future, welcomed participants to the afternoon session. She explained that the purpose of this session was to look at the proposals in the White Paper and the subsequent Education and Inspections Bill from two perspectives: that of local authorities, and national politicians. Margaret pointed out that the conference steering group had hoped this would be a cross-party debate. However, several members of the Conservative Party, including David Willetts, the Party's education spokesperson, had declined an invitation to attend.

Councillor Raj Chada, Leader of Camden Council, said that he was speaking from a Camden perspective. Camden shared the Government's concern to achieve the highest possible standards for all children. The Council already enjoyed excellent relations with its schools, and there was a strong collegiate atmosphere. It might be a good idea to have strong autonomous schools, but these needed to be brought together in a strong collaborative network. Why did the Government emphasize autonomy; what was Camden doing to hold schools back? Trust schools caused concern, as did the proliferation of faith schools. The Government's education proposals could affect the creation of social cohesion in a community.

Dr Robert Garnett, Chair of Confed and Director of Children's Services and Lifelong Learning for Hounslow, said that Confed welcomed the idea of 'personalisation'. It also welcomed the emphasis on the role of parents in creating 'well-disciplined' schools. But there was also much to worry about. The Government had once claimed to be concerned about 'standards, not structures', but this no longer seemed to be true. The Bill was an attack on the idea of local democratic accountability and this could act to the detriment of the weakest and the most vulnerable in society. It was surely the local authority which was there to safeguard the interests of all children; only chaos could result from the proliferation of admissions authorities. And how are sponsors of trust schools and academies to be made accountable to parents? Under the new rules, the strong will flourish and the rest will suffer.

The talk by **David Chaytor MP** received a fairly hostile reception from some sections of the audience. This was largely because he believed that the Bill constituted a real improvement on the White Paper and that it would be further improved at the committee stage in the Commons. He also claimed that the publication of the White Paper had at least triggered a very constructive and exciting national debate. There were at least *two* crucial areas where things needed to be tightened up: (1) the future role of the local authorities; and (2) the whole question of admissions policy. It was totally unacceptable that the Secretary of State should have a veto over the creation of new 'community schools'. It needed to be recognised by opponents that new trust schools had few powers not currently available to foundation schools; but there needed to be clearer rules as to who could become sponsors. It was also important to argue that if we rule out the introduction of selection *in the future*, it becomes very difficult to defend *existing* selection procedures.

Sarah Teather MP, the newly appointed education spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, argued that there were ‘positive’ elements in the Bill, including the clauses on discipline and nutrition. The main problem with the Bill was that there was no clear sense of direction: was it about collaboration or competition? The Bill gave schools greater control over their admissions policies which would *entrench* social segregation, rather than deal with it. The one freedom that schools *did* want was over the curriculum, which the Bill said nothing about. Once again, there was the lack of a positive response to the Tomlinson proposals.

FINAL PLENARY SESSION

In drawing the conference to a close, Chris Waterman summarised key issues arising from the morning discussion groups. Each of the ten groups had addressed the same question:

A Good Local School for Every Child: how do we achieve it; what changes are needed to the Education and Inspections Bill?

Chris selected the following ‘sound bites’ from reports of the morning discussions:

- oppose ‘tripartite’ approach to 14-19
- social cohesion, not diversity
- nurture the grass roots
- London is neither the centre nor the whole of the universe
- ‘democracy not donations’
- schools aren’t factories
- parents don’t want choice – just a good local school
- don’t give away the ‘community silver’ (to trusts acquired by schools)
- do faith schools help build communities?
- you can’t trust trusts
- the sub-text is privatisation

How might we achieve it?

He then presented a selection of suggestions as to how *A Good Local School for Every Child* might be achieved:

- smaller local schools
- schools serving their community
- sort out admissions
- abolish selection
- unpack ‘choice and diversity’
- talk to the students

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- local systems, not individual schools
- 'no school is an island'
- 'benevolent' federations
- no majority interest on governing bodies
- involve the school workforce.

What changes are needed?

Suggestions made in the morning discussion groups included the following:

- replace diversity with social cohesion
- remove the Secretary of State's veto on community schools
- the admissions code – make it tough and make it stick
- abolish all selection
- take Black, minority and ethnic issues seriously
- remove 'foundation schools with a foundation' (trust schools).

What actions are required?

- local meetings reflecting local feeling
- make MPs feel the wind of change by:
 - sending emails
 - writing letters
 - attending surgeries
- preach to the unconverted!
- stand up and be counted.

Next Steps

- a report of the conference would be available for inclusion on the websites of all participating organisations
- all conference participants would receive an email of the concluding powerpoint presentation
- the education alliance supporting the conference would held to ensure that lobbying on the Bill was coordinated effectively
- there would be continued cooperation between the partners involved in organising the conference
- the situation would be reviewed after the third reading of the Bill.